Interviews: Adrian Attard Trevisan – Co-Founder and CEO, Umana Medical Technologies, Malta



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Adrian Attard Trevisan, co-founder and CEO at Umana Medical Technologies, shares the story of the company's creation and his goals to distribute its innovative solutions to European markets as well as the Maltese environment for innovative medical device companies.

Can you introduce the history behind Umana Medical's foundation?

I started my first project, a company called AAT Research – renamed Neurotech International after it became publicly listed in Australia – when I was still a student. At the time, I wanted to help young autistic patients by offering them a headband capable of monitoring and managing their autism. Umana Medical is my second project with a very interesting product as well. Indeed, we have developed a tattoo sensor that is able to record vital signs. This technology was imagined by two professors after creating a special ink able to store data. However, being academicians, they could not think out of the box and start the research and development activities to start the commercialization. As one of them was my mentor during my studies, he approached me to help them and I took it upon myself to develop it. One of my abilities is to take an invention that has been developed and see what is missing to be able to launch this efficient and reliable new solution for patients. As long as I can see the use of the technology for patients, I can work with it. Therefore, at Umana Medical, I am in charge of ensuring our product respects the proper and stringent medical devices regulation in the country. I was also in charge of establishing the business plan of the company, from the development of the project to its delivery to patients.

I have always been motivated in developing projects until they have a life on their own and in the same way I built AAT Research, I am planning the same evolution for Umana Medical. I am always aiming to build projects with an end user in sight and level up companies, so I don’t believe I am the type of CEO that fits in perfectly for non-growing businesses. I am able to focus for a long period of time to build a project if I can see that it actually helps a patient but when operations become too stable I tend to move forward. I believe that when you try to build a company in the long term, you end up not building a useful product or activity improving the healthcare environment and you are not fulfilling yourself personally either.

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On the other hand, what are the major challenges that you faced and what has been your strategy to overcome them?

The main challenges in Malta are mentalities and infrastructures. The business environment has been improving dramatically over the last seven years, from the start-up mentality and the ability to actually grow a company to the way investors work in Malta, investing in more tangible projects a few years ago and now slowly moving towards more intangible investments such as high-potential company. I can see the differences in mentality between my first and second companies but there is still a lot of work to do. For example, for my first company, I needed to go abroad myself and convinced foreign investors to sponsor my project during face-to-face meetings. With Umana Medical, it was easier to raise funds and to advance in the product development, especially for clinical trials. Of course, for the second company, I had the track record of AAT Research but despite that, Umana Medical was built more smoothly than AAT Research as the local authorities were much more helpful. We also benefited from a scheme from the European Investment Fund to start the company thanks to our project and our vision. I deeply believe that nowadays, ideas are cheap as everyone can have one but the difference between them is the execution. Not having the proper finance usually tarnishes the execution as you can arrive late to the market and commercialize a potentially obsolete product or you go bankrupt before actually going to the market.

As an entrepreneur involved in providing ground-breaking innovative solutions, what is your assessment of the current innovative offer on the island and what can be done to attract more innovation?

I believe certain fields can have much more innovation than the medical sector because of our important entry barriers. Our sector is strongly regulated with the need to get the proper

certifications before you are allowed to develop and commercialize the products. There is also a high risk of entering the market with an innovative product due to the high setup cost you have to put forward. Of course, it makes it appealing for a certain type of investors but considering the small size of Malta, it makes it slightly more difficult to enter. However, I am happy to see that it is starting to increase in the pharmaceutical and medical devices sectors.

Looking deeper to your portfolio, the Umana T1 platform seems to be your flagship solution for cardiac monitoring. Can you expand on the benefits this technology can bring to patients' lives and why is it so unique?

In order to develop a successful project, I always start by identifying a problem and finding a way to solve it. Before deciding to take over and develop Umana Medical, I looked at what was on the market and at the time, only the basic Holter devices and patches were available. We wanted to offer a better solution for patients than the patch and the Holter because they can lead to issues such as infections due to the glue, inaccuracy in the data collected and the difficulty to live a normal life due to the wires linked to the device.

Our system of tattoo sensors acts as a second skin that patients can keep up to 7 days and live a normal life. Our main goal is always to improve the quality of lives and give a better service. In this regard, we are offering heart monitoring devices through blood pressure and we are currently developing two other applications with the tattoo sensors. One will be a sweat analysis sensor that we are working on in collaboration with the top five pharmaceutical companies worldwide. The second application will focus on a sweat analysis that will prevent patients from going to blood test every now and then. Both files are currently under regulatory approval and will allow us to expand our offering in the next few months. We are also investing in a robotics facility to have a fully automated robotic assembly line that will help us produce more high-quality tattoo sensors.

Your technology should be fully launched by the end of the month. What is your distribution strategy for the product?

We will be launching Umana T1 platform at the *HIMSS Europe & Health 2.0 Conference* in Barcelona. We will be there with a stand presenting our innovation and, in the meantime, the product shipments will be exported to all our distributors in the country and in Europe. Therefore, we are currently increasing our distributors network in order to collaborate with solid partners around the world. So far, we have a strong distribution network in Portugal and we will be entering Italy soon. We will also be launching in the United Kingdom some clinical testing in selected hospitals in the same way we are currently running a 2000-patient clinical trials in Mater Dei

Hospital in Malta.

Our strategy is mainly to focus on EU countries and soon to develop the Middle East region thanks to our upcoming CE certification. In the next few years, we would like to enter the USA but with a different strategy. Indeed, we believe we would need our own office before going there as the culture changes drastically and we will be personally responsible for our product. We need to be very well equipped in terms of support and service and build a strong network of partners all over the country.

Therefore, we will be really busy on that front in the upcoming weeks. I believe that we need to prove ourselves first in our own country, showing physically the superiority of what we offer, before moving to other markets. The word of mouth will also be really important in building our credibility and reputation overseas.

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How do you build your name in the international market?

I don’t believe in isolation which is unfortunately the case in small countries where companies prefer to do business on their own. I believe in people and building strong partnerships. For example, at the moment we are partnering with five universities and with a top five global pharmaceutical companies. We are also collaborating with our own distribution partners and we are opening an office in Italy. I believe start-ups should stand on top of giant’s shoulders to benefit from their experience and launch a product successfully. We have to admit that small companies can be good in a very specific area and using other partners as much as possible can leverage one’s own position and get the products accessible to patients which is the ultimate goal. Moreover, it can also help the company grow by identifying in which area we are offering a unique and world class product.

I also believe that a small company can have attractive advantages. For example, at Umana Medical, we have 21 employees which allow us to be more flexible, a characteristic that big companies cannot have. We also have patents that are protecting our technologies and this very important asset makes it easier for partners to collaborate with us. Protecting yourself with patents is also important to ensure that the competition cannot act before you. Another differentiation of our company is the mindset that I encourage my employees to adopt. Indeed, I believe in cooperation and in never standing still but moving forward all the time. That is why, even if our product is being launched this month, we are continuously involved in research and development to remain an active company and ensure, no competition will surpass us easily.

What would you like our readers to think when they read about Umana Medical?

At Umana Medical, we are trying to tackle a problem that has been looking at by others before but by using a different out-of-the-box view. We are looking at opportunities while always having the patient in mind. While some people say that we are scared, I like to compare myself to others, to acknowledge when others are doing better than I do but to always try to do things differently and excel at what I do.

I am also driven by challenges and I like to wake up in the morning and go to the office motivated by seeing my team. I think Umana Medical and myself are very lucky to have such a talented team and it influences the result of the company considerably. Personally, I struggle at a number of things, but I can count on my team to bring their special skills and move forward. Finally, I believe that being passionate is the key to succeed in this challenging industry and Umana Medical is definitely passionate about its products and providing the best to patients.

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